



By Carlton Roark

You're So Vain, You Probably Think This Article Is About You

Ever since the release of toll-free numbers with a prefix other than 800 several years ago, there has been an effort by some in the telemarketing industry to create a caste system of sorts that exalts toll-free numbers with an 800 prefix — and in particular vanity numbers — while relegating all others to a form of bastard status.

The arguments created against toll-free numbers with a prefix other than 800 (and even some with an 800 prefix, vanity and otherwise) generally resemble the following:

- More consumers know that 800 is a toll-free prefix vs. 888, 877 or 866. Therefore, those consumers may not call the latter prefixes at all, or will accidentally call their 800 equivalent.
- Toll-free numbers with an 800 prefix are more legitimate.
- A vanity number using the letter “O” can be confused with the number “0” and will likely be misdialed.

On the surface, and without much thought on the issue, these criticisms at first might appear to be valid, until you actually think through the logic and also realize who is advancing these criticisms and why.

It's important to keep in mind that ever since the release of new toll-free numbers with a prefix other than 800 a few years ago, a circling of the wagons has occurred by some who are attempting to preserve the value of the previously monopolized franchise of toll-free numbers, vanity and otherwise, that have an 800 prefix. I'm referring to those in particular who deal in shared-use vanity numbers, as well as some telemarketing companies.

Both have large investments in their inventory of toll-free 800 numbers. Confronted with the flood of new toll-free prefixes and the threat they pose to their businesses, many of these companies have resorted to creating myths, such as those above, that are intended to disparage toll free numbers with a prefix other than 800.

These companies have become the metaphorical little Dutch boy feverishly trying to plug their finger into every new hole in the dike that represents the release of another toll-free prefix. Not only are they unable to

hold back the dam, but also the reasoning they're using doesn't hold water either.

Consider the following in response to the three criticisms above:

- The assertion that toll-free numbers with an 800 prefix are far more recognizable as being toll-free is a perception generally held by those who are much older. For example, for those older than 60, 80 percent of their lives have been lived knowing only 800 numbers. However, those in their 20s have been exposed to all variations of toll-free prefixes for their entire adult lives. It's *this group of consumers* that's getting larger every day. Furthermore, the future release of still more toll-free numbers with a prefix other than 800 will simply further relegate the latter to minority status.
- Not only does asserting that toll-free numbers with a prefix other than 800 are less legitimate reveal your age, it also represents an arrogant defiance of fact. Those who cite 800 toll-free numbers as still being overwhelmingly preferred by companies large and small are usually citing companies run or influenced by those over the age of 60.
- The third patronizing argument represents the height of arrogance in that it supposes that people don't have the basic skills to spell simple words. If you accept this reasoning, you also must accept that consumers will be confused by the similarity between a lower-case “l” and capital “i,” which, in turn, are both similar to the number “1.” Playing a game of “lowest common denominator” when it comes to human intellect creates a ridiculous downward spiral in expectations that is entirely unfounded.

The bottom line is this: if you can secure a toll-free vanity number — regardless of its prefix — that spells your company name, product or service clearly and without using a combination of letters and numbers, secure and use that number. What's of paramount importance is whether the number is memorable and appropriately descriptive — not that it has the dubiously exalted 800 prefix rather than another toll-free prefix. Only those seeking to preserve the value of their previously monopolized franchise of toll-free numbers (vanity and otherwise) would believe otherwise. ■

Carlton Roark is a banker and DRTV entrepreneur who can be reached at (888) 289-6688.